

Commons Committee Stage of the Agriculture Bill: Briefing for MPs on amendments 109, NC17, NC12, NC8, NC11 and NC19

Days 3 and 4 of line-by-line scrutiny, November 2018

Secure long-term funding for the sector (109)

Greener UK supports amendment 109 tabled by Philip Dunne. As a long-term industry, farmers need certainty over the funding available if they are to engage in future policy with confidence. At present, the agriculture bill is silent on this central issue. Although multi-annual contracts with government may provide a degree of certainty for individual farmers and land managers, certainty is also needed for the sector as a whole. As such, the bill should place a duty on ministers to set multi-annual budgets that reflect the scale of financial need associated with relevant policy objectives and specify the timeframe over which these budgets would be set.

Such funding should also provide for good quality, consistent advice which is accessible to all farmers and land managers. In other sectors, funding for transport infrastructure, international aid and, most recently, social housing, have all been set and guaranteed beyond the lifetime of the current parliament. If the government is asking farmers to commit to long term investment in a new scheme, it must lead by example and provide the certainty and security of long term funding.

Amendment 109 requires the Minister to bring forward a set of regulations to determine the budget-setting process, in a multi-annual financial framework, something which is currently missing from the bill.

In addition to bringing forward a multi-annual framework, Greener UK would also encourage Ministers to implement independent assessments of the funding needed for achieving the purposes set out in clause 1(1). An independent assessment commissioned in 2017 by some Greener UK members estimated the costs of meeting our environmental land management commitments alone at £2.3 billion per year.¹

The government must recognise the importance of our natural infrastructure as it does for other infrastructure, and identify the long-term funding needed to secure it for the next generation. Multi-annual funding is essential if we are to ensure a healthy, accessible environment, the recovery of our nature, and world-leading animal welfare.

If the government is not minded to accept amendment 109, we would like assurances from the government on how it will ensure long-term funding for farmers in the future. We would also like to be assured that the current funding to farmers will not be reduced beyond the existing commitment to maintain funding until 2022, given the evidence of need highlighted above.

Primacy of public goods (NC17)

Greener UK supports NC17 tabled by Kerry McCarthy. The government and ministers have repeatedly made it clear that public goods not rewarded through the market are the priority for future investment. Greener UK has strongly welcomed this intention, and see it as central to improving the environment, and access to it, for future generations, whilst enabling farmers to produce the food we need more sustainably.

Clause 1(1)(a) to (g) effectively lists these public goods. Making it clear on the face of the bill that these purposes are the priority for public investment will reinforce government commitments, and give confidence to farmers and land managers on the direction of future policy, enabling them to make long term shifts to sustainable land management and sustainable food production

Without giving the purposes in clause 1(1) primacy in the bill, it is not clear how the government will secure the stable policy for farmers that the bill is intended to deliver, nor the long-term investment in the environment that is needed for both people and nature.

Ensure trade deals do not undermine domestic standards (NC12, NC14, NC23)

Greener UK supports NC12 tabled by Deirdre Brock, NC14 tabled by Kerry McCarthy and NC23 tabled by David Drew. UK farming is one of the most exposed sectors to future trade deals after the UK has left the EU. There is a risk that while we maintain high standards and regulations at home, new trade deals could allow agri-products into the UK market of a much lower standard. To avoid undermining UK farmers, or precipitating a race to the bottom, the government must ensure that future international trade deals do not undermine UK standards.

During the passage of the agriculture bill, it is essential that the government provides assurances on how it will go about guaranteeing this. In particular, it needs to set out how it intends to ensure that animal welfare and environmental standards will be maintained throughout all future trade deals. Without safeguards against imports of low quality food produced to low animal welfare and environmental standards, international trade deals could undercut farmers and any environmental progress made domestically.

In addition, imported produce with lower environmental and animal welfare standards would result in the UK exporting its environmental footprint and degradation to other parts of the world.

If it is not minded to accept either NC12, NC14, or NC23, the government must make it clear how it intends to meet ministerial commitments made to date that UK standards and farmers will not be undermined in future trade deals.

Setting long-term targets and objectives (NC8, NC16)

Greener UK supports NC8 tabled by David Drew and NC16 tabled by Kerry McCarthy. Agriculture policy should be viewed in the context of the many other environmental processes that are ongoing. As well as delivering on outcomes and funding in the short term, it should allow for the setting of long-term targets and objectives to deliver on the broad purposes it sets out in clause 1 such as water quality, climate mitigation and soil health.

As well as delivering for the environment, long-term, measurable targets and objectives provide policy certainty and a framework for future investment for farmers. NC8 highlights that such targets will also be necessary for the delivery of relevant international goals that the UK is signed up to. As such, the bill should allow for targets that cover existing commitments, as well as new, ambitious goals that are vital for a healthy environment and nature's recovery.

Greener UK is not calling for such targets to be on the face of the bill but for a duty on the government to bring forward targets and objectives as soon as possible. The government has already announced it intends to bring forward an environment bill in 2019. Greener UK believes that bill should include a full set of thematic and time-bound objectives which the secretary of state must achieve. This could include targets to achieve the thematic purposes set out in the agriculture bill.

Legal targets, with identified milestones, such as that in the climate change act, have proven effective at delivering environmental outcomes in the past.

We would welcome further clarity from the Minister on how the government intends to enshrine in law the targets, objectives and commitments he referred to during the fifth sitting of the bill committee. ⁱⁱ

Establishing a UK-wide framework for agriculture (NC11)

Greener UK supports NC11 tabled by Ben Lake. In the UK, agriculture is a devolved matter. However, while the UK is an EU member state, most agriculture policy in the four countries of the UK is guided by common frameworks set at EU level, particularly the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). This amendment would require the four governments to work together on proposals to establish a common framework for agricultural support and land management.

Environmental issues do not respect borders, so steps to address environmental objectives will need collaboration across the UK. As the dominant land use in all four countries of the UK, agriculture policies in each of the four countries will be particularly important in managing common resources such as water, and improving the prospects for wildlife.

The importance of common frameworks in meeting international obligations and managing common resources was recognised by the UK government and devolved administrations through the Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) (EU Negotiations) in 2017. NC11 is largely based on the principles for common frameworks jointly agreed by the JMC(EN).

Future agriculture policies across the UK should include shared environmental ambition to meet domestic and international commitments and obligations associated with biodiversity, air quality, climate change and sustainable development. At the same time, it must respect the devolution settlement and ensure the devolved administrations can develop and tailor policy to reflect the differing environmental, social and political contexts in each of the four countries, and the differing landscapes, patterns of land use and farm business models. The specific requirements set out in NC11 would secure legislative safeguards to respect the devolution settlement whilst providing for necessary cooperation between the four governments.

If it is not minded to accept NC11, the government must make clear how it will cooperate with the devolved administrations in the development and implementation of future agriculture policies.

A duty to provide advice (NC19)

Greener UK supports NC19 tabled by David Drew. There is increasingly strong evidence that demonstrates the importance of trusted advice in securing effective environmental outcomes. The evidence is particularly strong that good advice can significantly improve the experience that farmers have of environmental land management schemes.

In responding to NC7 during the sixth sitting of the agriculture bill committee on 30th October, the minister made it clear that government wants to “...get back to a human relationship between an adviser and a farmer, and I believe that we can make the systems work far better.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Greener UK strongly supports the ambition behind this statement, and NC19 is wholly consistent with it. We believe that the agriculture bill should establish a coherent service for farm advice. Anyone in receipt of payments under the Bill should receive appropriate advice integrating environmental, technical and business aspects, to ensure that public goods are appropriate for the local context and are effectively delivered. Advice should adhere to nationally and locally agreed environmental objectives and be tailored to the circumstances of the farm business.

We would welcome clarity from the government on how it intends to realise its ambitions for future advice provision, given its recognition that good advice will be central to the success of future policies.

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Greener UK is a coalition of 13 major environmental organisations united in the belief that leaving the EU is a pivotal moment to restore and enhance the UK's environment.

Greener UK is working in partnership with Wildlife and Countryside Link.

Together, Greener UK and Wildlife and Countryside Link members have the support of over eight million people.



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ⁱ Rayment, M. (2017) Assessing the costs of Environmental Land Management in the UK. A report for the RSPB, the National Trust and The Wildlife Trusts

ⁱⁱ Agriculture Bill Committee, 5th sitting, column 149

ⁱⁱⁱ Agriculture Bill Committee, 6th sitting, column 222